

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY*

By C. E. Raven

Community is the magic word of to-day, soothing like the old lady's "Mesopotamia," spell-binding like the wizard's "abracadabra," opening the road to unlimited prosperity like Ali Baba's "open sesame" - it is the word that has drawn us here and sets us dreaming. And for an amateur like myself among experts like you it is fatally easy to talk nonsense about it.

There is, I believe, something important that I want to try to say about it, or perhaps about the science of relationships which lies behind it. In saying it I am bound to deal with matters, fundamental matters of faith and practice, on which we differ widely. To shirk such issues would be to trifle with you and with the subject. To speak plainly about them may cause pain. Will you forgive me if at any point I am clumsy and wounding, arrogant or over-critical? The times and the magnitude of the subject, and above all my own faults of knowledge and temper are my only excuse. And so to our subject.

Community is, as we have come to see, the achievement of Jesus Christ and His supreme gift to the world. At Pentecost when His Spirit was poured out upon His followers a new thing was created. Men and women were welded by the flame of that Spirit into an organic society, a fellowship, a communion of an entirely unprecedented kind. An integration similar to that which unifies, sublimates and inspires the saint or the prophet had been achieved in a group. "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul." They functioned as a single body, they responded immediately and inescapably to a single impulse, they shared, and united to express and to fulfil a single mind. For such community a new vocabulary had to be found: agape, the untranslatable word that describes God's love to us, that is manifested in Christ, and that transcends all human friendships in its selflessness, its purity, its power, and its wisdom; and koinonia which is communion and communism and community and yet surpasses in its warmth and strength and sensitiveness all that those words commonly imply; these terms, and a list of new virtues and graces that accompany them, testify to the novelty and the quality of the Pentecostal Church. The enormous energy released

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in it, the infective enthusiasm, the intellectual resources, the inflexibility of purpose in which it found fulfilment, and the amazing revolution which it accomplished are writ plain in history.

The sources of this outpouring, and the conditions which made it possible, are not obscure. These fishermen and peasants, these men and women who had been with Jesus, had received a threefold experience from Him. They had realized the one-ness of all in God, the harmony, majesty and intimacy of the Father's presence, the joy and power and insight which that presence enabled. Then they had seen the fact of evil challenged deliberately and victoriously when Jesus had faced hatred, betrayal, crucifixion - sin in its stark power - and triumphed over it on His Cross. Finally they had been forgiven their apostasy, purged of all pride, and commissioned to the winning of the world for Him. Vision, redemption, service - that threefold experience fitted them for Pentecost. Community was its consequence and fulfilment.

From time to time with individuals and groups a similar emergence of Christian community has been manifested. The early Franciscans, the early Quakers and many other groups of believers have recovered something at least of the Pentecostal energy. But in the main, both the presence and the appreciation of the Holy Spirit have been sadly lacking in the life of the Church. If not quite in the position of those whom St. Paul found at Ephesus who did not so much as know if there is any Holy Ghost, we have seen the Spirit become a perplexity, a formula, a synonym for ecclesiastical prestige or emotional extravagance. Our theology of the Spirit is tragically defective; our experience miserably poor. And the test of our failure is this, that to-day no man can say, "See how these Christians love one another" without irony. God forgive us that agape and koinonia are no longer the criteria of the Christian.

It is easy to point to the Church of the Apostolic Age and say "There is the Christian community. Repeat the conditions that preceded it and it will be restored." This was what we were content to do after the last war, and it is not enough. To leave the matter there would be to ignore the facts of subsequent history, their lessons and warnings. And these facts have got to be faced if our quest for community is to be realistic and sincere.

First, then, this: the Apostolic Church has been commissioned to "overcome the world", to transform its kingdoms into the Kingdom of God. Its great spokesman had declared that it was God's good pleasure to sum up all things in Christ. Its members had found in Him not only Christus Lux and Christus Victor but Christus Consummator, Christ the Way, the Truth, the Life. But the Light of the World had become the Light of the Church; "the Light that lighteneth every man that cometh into the world" had become the Light of some men to lead them out of the world. And this is, I am afraid, still largely true. We visualize Christian community in terms not of a universal human society with all its life inspired, controlled, integrated by the Spirit of Christ, but of small groups gathered out of pagan masses, segregated into close fraternities, and escaping from the tensions and tragedies of a world doomed to destruction. There are, I believe, very deep-seated distortions in our theology and consequently very misplaced emphasis in our devotional, practical and institutional religion which foster such an escapism; and if we are to achieve a

true concept of Christian community we cannot avoid looking at them as honestly as we can.

Fortunately their character is not obscure, is indeed expressed for us inescapably in the major issue of our time, that which we call familiarly but not very exactly the conflict between religion and science, the conflict typified by the monstrous paradox of our time. Ponder this if you doubt the gravity of the conflict. The greatest achievement of mankind in relation to his physical environment since the discovery of fire was announced to the world by the two great Christian democracies in terms of the annihilation of a great city. That is the result to which three hundred years of conflict and sixteen hundred of failure to integrate life have brought us.

And then reflect that in addition to the colossal revolution made certain by the unlocking of atomic energy there is the still more tremendous problem glanced at by our two previous speakers, familiar to every thoughtful scientist, but hardly yet realized by the Church, the possibility of the complete control of human life from artificial insemination at one end to compulsory euthanasia at the other, with physiological and psychological conditioning at each stage between birth and death.

If we are to attain, or even to aim at, Christian community not by way of escapism but by way of evangelism, we must, however unwillingly, face this challenge of science. For my own part I believe it to be perhaps the most important issue of our time. Certainly if we are to promote the summing up of all things in Christ, or even to fulfil our duty of proclaiming the Gospel, we must make the reconciliation of science and religion a primary part of our thoughts and prayers.

To discuss the question at length is obviously impossible. I can only state very briefly the salient points as I see them.

(1) The conflict is not due to the obscurantism of Christians or to the apostasy of scientists. Copernicus, Steno, Spallanzani, Mendel (to name but four) are typical of the enormous contribution which prominent ecclesiastics have made to scientific progress.

(2) The Christian who believes in the God-man, the Word-made-flesh, must believe therefore that physics and metaphysics, the natural and the supernatural "belong together", that bad theology vitiates science just as bad science vitiates theology.

(3) The medieval synthesis produced a splendidly coherent system of theology, but its science was purely fabulous and fantastic. It was succeeded by the New Philosophy of the scientific movement which in the 17th century nearly achieved a reinterpreted Christian synthesis. This failed; science and religion drew a frontier between their provinces; science became increasingly mathematical and mechanistic in order to give us an accurate account of the physical and chemical basis of life; under opposition from the Church it extended this technique to other spheres.

(4) Industrialism, urbanization, secularism, and on the religious side

escapism, other-worldliness, pietism, are the consequences; and the chasm between religion and life becomes too wide for any "weeks," however well planned to bridge.

(5) With the breakdown of scientific belief in a closed Universe, in the omni-competence of quantitative treatment, and in the irrelevance of vital and moral considerations, a profound change has come over the mentality and outlook of science. Faced by the evidence of its own catastrophic powers its leaders are ready for full co-operation in the great contemporary business of avoiding race-suicide by the establishment of peace.

(6) In spite of religious and theological obscurantism there are signs that the Church may have learnt its lesson and be ready to meet the scientists with generosity and sincerity. We can only do so if we recover a large sense of the integrative power of Christ - that is, a theology and experience of His Spirit.

(7) In the work "towards a Christian community" we shall be splendidly promoting this end; for theology is not made by dons in universities or contemplatives in the cloister; it springs from the doing of the Will of God, from the life that is lived in Christ. It is because, in and through the re-integration of life in rural communities, we may hope to recover a true appreciation of nature for our religion and a true sense of wonder and value in our science, that this movement and conference deserve the gratitude and goodwill of all who care for the recovery of a synthetic and coherent theology and an integral and consistent way of life.